

HISTORICAL HOUSES

How to DATE a house

By Catha McSweeney
The Patriot Ledger

Some people date people. Ann Noyes of Duxbury dates houses. Noyes, a life-time Duxbury resident and first-grade teacher at the Chandler School there, is a member of the Date Board Committee of the Duxbury Rural and Historical Society. Her hobbies include history and preservation as well as genealogy, and using them, she has determined the age of her own and many others' antique houses.

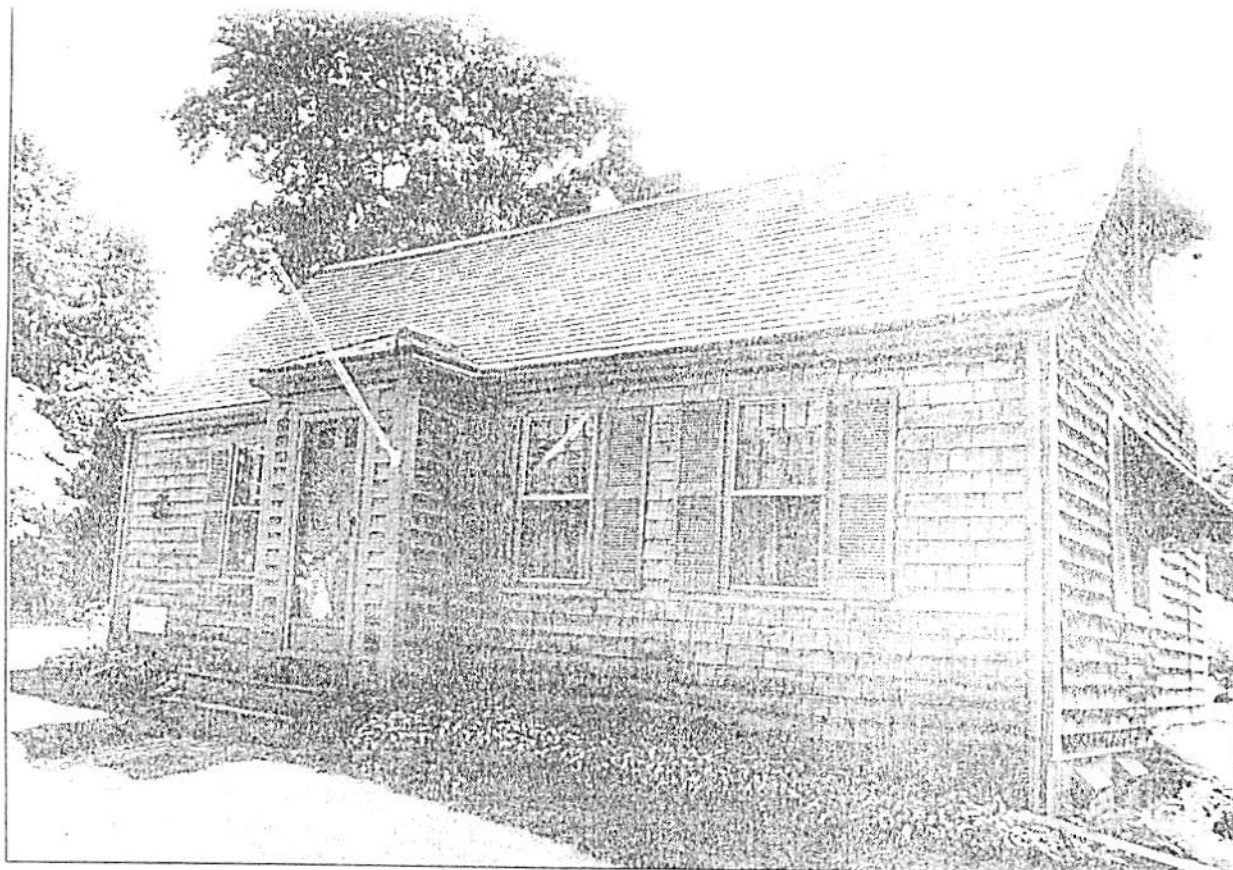
The date board affixed to the front left corner of her miniature Cape Cod Cottage proclaims, "Moses Soule, circa 1700. D.R.H.S." (The initials stand for Duxbury Rural and Historical Society).

"Date boards are sometimes used as a status symbol," she said with refreshing frankness during a recent interview. "But people want them because they're really interested in old houses and their history, too."

"I'm expecting to get a bronze marker (for her house, from the Duxbury Historic Commission, available only to those with date boards) and, I'll admit, it's a status symbol, and I'm glad to be getting it," Noyes confessed.

Dating houses is more than a hobby for the architectural historians on the staff of the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities in Boston, whose job it is to determine the age of the society's valuable holdings. When time permits, the SPNEA will do

MOSES SOULE
c.1700



The date board (inset above) on Ann Noyes' Duxbury house with legend, "Moses Soule, circa 1700, D.R.H.S." certifies its antiquity. The

home's proportions, known as a three-quarter, miniature Cape (three windows instead of the customary four) reflect its period.

Fred Keenan photos/The Patriot Ledger

Many people do their own dating, according to Curtis, and some use the SPNEA publication, *Preserving Your Old House*, as a guide. The booklet not only describes the eight most common restoration mistakes made by ardent amateurs, and how to avoid them; but also how to use clues such as style, framing, orientation, windows, siding and nails to track down the age of a home.

(The booklet is available to non-members for \$5, plus \$1 for postage and handling, and a total of \$5.25 for society members, from SPNEA at 141 Cambridge St., Boston, MA 02114.)

Curtis also recommends self-help publications from the American Association of State and Local History, 172 Second Ave. North, Nashville, Tenn., 37201, and the Preservation Press of the National Trust for Historic Preservation in Washington, at 1785 Massachusetts Ave. NW, Washington, D.C., 20036.

"For most people, it's easiest to use these publications, because the experts can't handle all the calls from homeowners. There are too many of them," she said.

Noyes, who recommends Eric Sloane's books about early American uses of wood, follows a paper trail more than the physical evidence in dating houses, while SPNEA stresses the latter.

Homeowners with interest — and patience — can use Noyes' technique, which, she said, sometimes takes years, rather than weeks or months.

"To date my own, or any house," she said, "I start with the Plymouth County Atlas of 1879, to see if the house is listed. Then I go to the Ford Map, done in 1833. It's a map of Duxbury, with a dot for every house that existed then, with the owner's name written in," she said, adding, "I have no idea who Mr. Ford was."

If the house is not in either of these references, she knows it did not exist then, but "just looks old." If it is included, she turns next "to the ancient town reports" to see if there's a mention of the house she's researching, or the families that lived in it.

From the old town reports, "I take down all the names I can find of people who have lived in the house, and then I go the Registry of Deeds in Plymouth," Noyes continued.

The registry has books that go back to the 1600s. One set of books shows who owned and sold a plot of land; another, who bought it. Armed with this information, Noyes finds copies of the actual deeds in a third book.

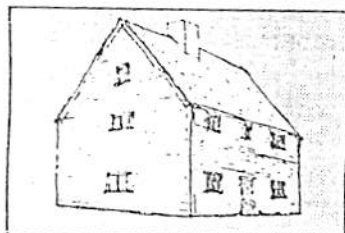
"The people at the registry will make photo copies of deeds for you to take home," she continued. "This is very helpful, because they're hard to read because they're handwritten, and you have to figure out the meaning of some of the (archaic) words."

Ann Grady, an architectural historian at SPNEA, agrees that dating — and preserving — an old house is important to the owner and to posterity.

"In today's real estate market, it adds to the value of a house to preserve its original features," said Grady, "and to have it dated accurately leads to proper treatment of its materials," such as beams,

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Types of houses



First Period

Common from about 1600 to 1725.

Characteristics:

- Massive chimney
- Casement windows
- Asymmetrical plan and elevation
- Steep roof pitch of 45°-60°
- Gable overhangs

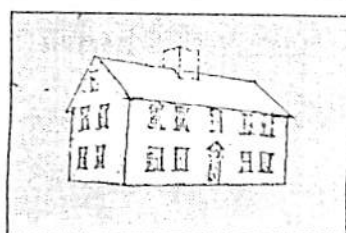


Federal

In vogue with New England housewrights from about 1780 to 1820.

Characteristics:

- A low profile roof
- Balustrade across roof edge
- Balanced elevation
- Light classical trim details

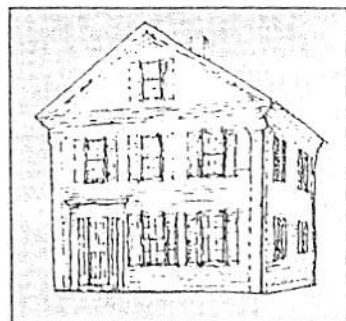


Georgian

Popular from about 1725 to 1790.

Characteristics:

- Large central chimney
- Moderate roof pitch of 30°-40°
- Center entrance
- Balanced plan and elevation
- Double hung windows.

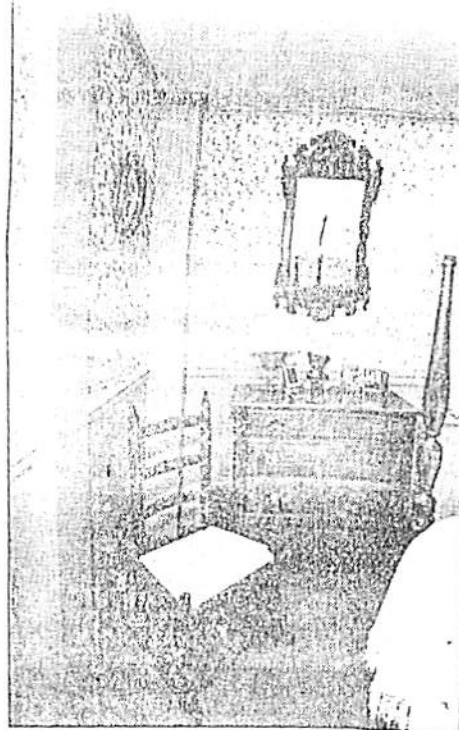


Greek Revival

Common from about 1820 to 1860.

Characteristics:

- A pedimented gable end facing the street
- Pilasters on the corners
- Heavy trim
- Small, spindly chimneys



Boxed beams on the bedroom wall enclose earlier, more rustic beams. Boxing, an important clue to the age of a house, was done after this home was built.